1969

"Powerhouse": Eudora Welty's portrait of the artist as jazz musician

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"POWERHOUSE": EUDORA WELTY'S PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS JAZZ MUSICIAN

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

Lehigh University

1969

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

May 15, 1969
Date

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Abstract

"Powerhouse," a story in Eudora Welty's first collection, A Curtain of Green, illustrates her methods and themes. Many of the stories in A Curtain of Green employ the grotesque and several of them contain the element of fantasy; "Powerhouse" is representative of the collection in these respects, but greater significance lies in its expression of thematic ideas treated in all of her early work. For Miss Welty there are two great mysteries, the mysteries of the self and of the outer world. From what Robert Penn Warren calls the fact of isolation she has explored the themes implicit in love and separateness, identity and alienation, and the human need for imposed order upon a meaningless universe in which fate rules with an often terrifying force. The theme of "Powerhouse" contains markedly the elements of love, isolation, and fate, and offers a variation on themes variously presented in other stories.

Often dismissed somewhat lightly as a regional writer, Miss Welty has defended regionalism in several critical essays, wherein she emphasizes the importance of a sense of place on a writer's sensibilities and suggests that often it is just this deep-felt sense of place which produces universal meaning in fiction. One way of transcending the geographical boundaries of a region is to make use of myth, finding patterns and suggesting associations which reside in the collective unconscious. Miss Welty has done just that throughout her work, employing mythic figures in

associative evocations that enhance her stories; "Powerhouse" is richer than most of her early work in both implicit and explicit mythic material.

Finally, "Powerhouse" represents Miss Welty's view of the artist. Strangely enough, the Negro pianist works in ways similar to Miss Welty's own in his imaginative improvisation on the theme of love and separateness and in his use of fantasy and the grotesque. Like Miss Welty, he is in the Romantic tradition of art, which emphasizes the artist's imaginative faculty and his concern for metaphysical isolation and social alienation.

I "Powerhouse" as a Variation on Eudora Welty's Themes

"Powerhouse" is one of seventeen stories in Eudora Welty's first collection, A Curtain of Green (1941). All of these stories had been published in various periodicals between June, 1936, and August, 1941; "Powerhouse was evidently one of the last to be written, appearing first in The Atlantic Monthly in June of 1941. Commenting on the obvious similarities between the stories in A Curtain of Green, several reviewers quickly concluded that Miss Welty was one more Southern realist with a penchant for the unusual. "Like many Southern writers," Time wrote, "she has a strong taste for melodrama, and is preoccupied with the demented, the deformed, the queer, the highly spiced. Of the 17 pieces only two report states of experience which could be called normal."[1] The stories show "too great a preoccupation with the abnormal and the grotesque," observed Rose Feld in New York Herald Tribune Books.[2] Gladys Graham Bates followed along similar lines: "Some readers will find Miss Welty too preoccupied with the eccentric and unfortunate . . . . Miss Welty turns instinctively, it seems, to the odd, grotesque, or sardonic."[3] And Time concluded that "her worst fault is her lust for melodrama, of the insidious sort which lies less in violence than in tricked atmosphere."[4]

One might like to know which two of the stories report states of experience which could be called normal, or how Gladys Bates moved "Flowers for Marjorie" out of New York City into "a small Mississippi town", but undoubtedly the reviewers' observations are generally accurate enough (though their insistence on the word "preoccupied" might be quarreled with); and, just as surely, the observations are superficial.

Subsequent criticism, more considered than the reviews, has overwhelmingly rejected the notion that Miss Welty is interested in the grotesque primarily for the sake of a startling or shocking effect; her fiction demands more than perusal. Granville Hicks notes that "if one reads carefully, it is apparent that Miss Welty is not preoccupied with violence and horror, in the way that Erskine Caldwell so often is, and not even to the extent that William Faulkner sometimes is. The meaning of the story is never in the violence, nor is the abnormality of the characters their important quality."[5] "Squalor, violence, and decadence have in themselves no importance for Miss Welty. They are merely facts, and facts, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are no more than means to an end. What matters in her stories is never the thing that happens, but the effect of the thing on human beings."[6] Alfred Appel, in A Season of Dreams, argues the case similarly: "But her

use of the grotesque.... can be justified, for the meaning of a story never lies solely in its horror or violence; the distortions intensify the pathos of a situation and express psychological and moral truths."[7] And Ruth M. Vande Kieft, in her thorough and sensitive treatment of Miss Welty's fiction, observes that "while it is true that Miss Welty often depicts the abnormal, especially in A Curtain of Green, it is scarcely with an eye to the sensational or melodramatic. The focus is never on the grotesque for its own sake, for the living horror it evokes."[8]

It is not enough, then, to see A Curtain of Green simply as an exercise in the striking depiction of abnormal people in sometimes strange circumstances, though such a view does serve to tie the stories together as a characteristic. Like most serious writers, Miss Welty is chiefly concerned with rendering a view of life through her fiction; the story transcends its material and transforms it. "Through the story's translating and ordering of life," she says, "the unconvincing raw material becomes the very heart's familiar. Life is strange. Stories hardly make it more so; with all they are able to tell and surmise, they make it more believably, more inevitably so."[9]

If the nature of the raw material in A Curtain of Green serves to unify the stories only superficially, the use to which it is put provides a deeper connection. The stories are tied

together more securely in theme than in content; indeed, Robert Penn Warren finds "a great variety among them in subject matter and method and, more particularly, mood."[10] However, the use of strange material does dominate in A Curtain of Green, even if it is handled with variety, and this use points to thematic purpose. In Fiction of the Forties, Chester H. Eisinger notes the connection: "Eudora Welty [like Carson McCullers] is also on familiar terms with gothic abnormality, although not as deeply possessed by it. She uses her characters--her deaf mutes or mad, decadent aristocrats--out of the same preoccupation with the themes of isolation, love and separateness, communication. Like Mrs. McCullers, she constantly probes the problem of identity or of separateness which leads to isolation, while at the same time she forces upon her characters a recognition of the demands of love which can be fulfilled only through communication."[11]

I am not quite sure how the problem of identity or of separateness leads to isolation, but Eisinger's summary coincides very nearly, though not precisely, with the observations of other critics regarding the themes pervading Miss Welty's early fiction. Warren was the first to posit these: "To begin with, almost all of the stories deal with people who, in one way or another, are cut off, alienated, isolated from the world."[12] The nature of the isolation may vary from story to story, "but the fact of

isolation, whatever its nature, provides the basic situation of Miss Welty's fiction. The drama which develops from this basic situation is of either of two kinds; first, the attempt of the isolated person to escape into the world; or second, the discovery by the isolated person, or by the reader, of the nature of the predicament." The theme of isolation, variously treated as it is, examines life in terms of polar opposites, roughly corresponding to the inner life and the outer world--"the dream and the world, the idea and nature, innocence and experience, individuality and the anonymous, devouring life-flux, meaning and force, love and knowledge."[14] Eunice Glenn, in "Fantasy in the Fiction of Eudora Welty," notes the repeated appearance of these polar relationships and identifies them in terms only slightly different from Warren's: "It is in the inter-relationship of the external and the internal--reality and the imagination-- that the particular significance of Miss Welty's method would seem to be."[15] Following Warren, whose essay he credits with initially stimulating his interest in Miss Welty's fiction, Alfred Appel emphasizes the need for the isolated characters to overcome their separateness: "The stories in . . . A Curtain of Green all record the impact of human separateness on the innocent or defenseless individual."[16] Appel points to seven stories from the collection (not including "Powerhouse") as "stories in which the characters are trying to cope

with a primal loneliness that is heightened by physical isolation, the vagaries of chance, and the indifference of others. . . . Tentative or desperate, their painful efforts to bridge the distance between love and separateness only lead to a deeper sense of isolation; turned back upon themselves, they try to order their lives through dreams and fantasies." ("Powerhouse" would fit this description very nicely but for one exception: Powerhouse's effort to overcome separateness does not seem to lead to a deeper sense of isolation.)

Appel's summary brings up another element found nearly everywhere in Miss Welty's fiction--the element of fantasy. Readers with a practical bent are often irritated by the elusive quality of many of her stories. "The trustworthiness of sight, the confidence that a person knows when he is asleep and dreaming and when he is awake, the distinct difference and comforting gap between dream and reality, irrational and rational, illusion or fantasy and fact, are constantly being threatened by Miss Welty's fiction."[18] In the earlier stories the fantasy is largely restricted to the minds of some of the characters, while the narration is objective and realistic; in most of these stories the reader need not be disturbed about what is happening, or rather, whether what is being related really is occurring. But in the second collection of stories, A Wide Net (1943), fantasy acquires another dimension.

With the first sentence of the first story ("First Love") the reader is forewarned not to expect to be able to accept simply and unequivocally the narrated action; "Whatever happened, it happened in extraordinary times, in a season of dreams. . . ."[19] The narrator is introducing us to a fictional world in which, as Warren says, the "logic . . . is not quite the logic by which we live, or think we live, our ordinary daylight lives."[20] This technique, irritating though it might be to some readers, reinforces the thematic thrust of the stories--"the inter-relationship of the external and the internal--reality and the imagination," as Eunice Glenn sees it. "Tension . . . in Miss Welty's fiction takes the form of conflict between the real and the imagined. Fantasy, therefore, serves as an agent in making the conflict more dramatic, in rendering the idea."[21]

"Powerhouse," of course, is not among the stories in A Wide Net, where the "season of dreams" constantly brings reality into question, but it was written closer in point of time to the Wide Net collection than to many of the stories in A Curtain of Green.[22] Apparently "the stories of The Wide Net [sic] represent a specializing, an intensifying, of one of the many strains which were present in A Curtain of Green"[23]; "but already in 'Powerhouse' . . . the worlds of dream and actuality are becoming less clearly distinguishable."[24]

Generalizations are particularly dangerous to apply to Miss

Welty's fiction, but it seems reasonably safe to say that the stories in these two collections, if viewed chronologically, represent a gradual tendency (but not a steady progression) away from objective reporting of the actual world towards a subjective, suggestively impressionistic presentation of the dream world; events themselves become progressively understated and the human response to events becomes emphasized as a center of interest. "Powerhouse" seems to stand somewhere near the midpoint of this development.

Very little difficulty is encountered in following the action of the story--in fact, very little "happens." The narrator, with great enthusiasm, describes Powerhouse and his band playing at a dance. He and three of his musicians retire during an intermission to a local cafe', where he continues with embellishments a tale begun on the bandstand: he has received a telegram, he says, informing him that his wife, Gypsy, is dead. In the cafe' he describes her death as a suicide. The musicians return to the dance and complete the engagement. There is no reason to doubt the reliability of the narrator; the action is related reportorially and objectively, particularly in the middle section of the story. It is Powerhouse's account of what happened that is perplexing. Obviously, his version of the manner in which Gypsy dies is a fabrication. But there is no evidence that he even has a wife, or that the telegram tells him

that she was dead, or that he actually receives a telegram in the first place. We have only his word on these matters. Rooting out the facts in his story is no small undertaking, and it is a procedure more likely to produce debate than to bring resolution.

If, on the one hand, we take Powerhouse at his word, we must see him as a strange and deeply pathetic creature, a man who learns of his wife's death, simply goes about his business, some time later casually informs his companions of the event (and their reactions are strangely stoic--no one drops a beat), and concocts a mysteriously satisfying version of the tragedy. All of this suggests a man who has been often horribly treated by fate or society and who is somehow able to endure the cruelest blow (assuming as we are the veracity of his story, we can easily eliminate the possibility that he did <u>not</u> love Gypsy, i. e., there was no cruel blow, on the grounds that the story would have little meaning if that were the case). This interpretation achieves at least pathos, but there remains too a disturbing absurdity about it. On the other hand, assuming that Powerhouse has fabricated the <u>entire</u> story about Gypsy yields even more problems: What could motivate him to do this? Is there any point to it, and if there is, what is it?

There are, of course, other alternatives: Perhaps Powerhouse has received a telegram bearing some other painful message. Perhaps there <u>is</u> a Gypsy who has been unfaithful; Powerhouse's fantasy then

is a form of revenge through wish-fulfillment. Or perhaps there was a wife or a love who had dies some time before, whose memory is invoked by the music being played ("Pagan Love Song," a "sad song"). The fact that Powerhouse says he had spoken to Gypsy the previous night on the telephone could indicate that he was still unable to accept her death until he could purge his sorrow through his music and his imagination. I do not think that any final judgment on the veracity of Powerhouse's tale is possible; nor is one vital to the impact of the story. The ambiguity is far from destructive for it contributes to the story's effectiveness; the fantasy and the mystery encourage and invite the reader to become more deeply involved, to probe the story from different directions.

For some reason possibly having to do with the complexity of the story, "Powerhouse" for over two decades was "often anthologized [and] seldom commented upon."[25] Most of the commentary that was ventured is brief and not very enlightening. Louise Bogan sees the story as a characterization of the "Negro band leader with his sadism and delusions of grandeur."[26] Eunice Glenn observes that in "Powerhouse" "a privately constructed world clashes with reality and brings it into focus,"[27] a comment not without value, though we might wish it were more explicit in defining what the reality is and how it is brought into focus. Ray B. West, Jr. offers the only early extensive analysis of the story, wherein he recognizes the

importance of the musical interplay and sees Powerhouse as a symbol (of the artist) through which the story's theme is realized: "The artist in general, of whom Powerhouse in this story is the all-encompassing symbol, gives form to the doubts and fears of the race. This is Miss Welty's theme, presented in a form in which words share equally, both as meaning and as motif, with the musical motif as expressed in a music-like prose."[28]

Critical interest in "Powerhouse" has accelerated in the sixties, and the story seems to hold various centers of attraction for different writers. Ruth Vande Kieft is concerned primarily with the fantastic element in the story[29]; in a more thorough treatment Alfred Appel deals with it in terms of Negro music, pointing to themes inherent in the blues, such as isolation, wandering, endurance of pain, and the search for love.[30] Smith Kirkpatrick finds in the story Miss Welty's conception of the artist[31], and Benjamin Griffith sees it as "a kind of crystallization of Miss Welty's method as well as of her most persistent themes."[32]

Griffith's observation strikes me as being extremely perceptive and valuable; certainly it represents an advance from Granville Hick's view of the story as one which departs from the usual concerns expressed in Miss Welty's first two collections. "Nor do her stories," says Hicks, "always conform to the patterns that have been discussed. There is, for example, 'Powerhouse,'

an enigmatic story of a Negro orchestra leader with a strong, wild rhythm in it."[33]

Evidently Miss Welty herself does not wish to see any of her stories analyzed in terms of patterns discovered in other stories:

> The main lesson I've learned from work so far is the simple one that each story is going to open up a different prospect and pose a new problem; no story bears on another or helps another. . . . I could add that it's hard for me to think that a writer's stories are a unified whole in any respect except perhaps their lyric quality. I don't believe they are written in any typical, predictable, logically developing, or even any chronological way (for all that a good writer's stories are, to the reader, so immediately identifiable as his).[34]

Nor is she convinced of the efficacy of any sort of analysis, even, presumably, those analyses which confine themselves to the bounds of a single story:

> I have been baffled by analysis and criticism of some of my stories. When I see them analyzed--most usually "reduced to elements"--sometimes I think, "This is none of me." Not that I am too proud to like being reduced, especially; but that I could not remember starting with those elements--with anything I could so label. The fact that a story will reduce to elements, can be analyzed, does not necessarily mean it started with them--certainly not consciously.[35]

The concern here is that of a writer who does not wish criticism to destroy the unique or delightful quality of a story--and undoubtedly criticism can be destructive in that way. But surely

a piece of art contains more than what the artist remembers about its creation; and it may often reveal in ways which its creator never intended consciously. And Miss Welty indicates in her picturesque way that she is not so strongly committed to the intentional fallacy: "Criticism can be an art too, and may go deeper than its object, and more times around; it may pick up a story and waltz with it, so that it's never the same."[36] Finally, Miss Vande Kieft answers the objection to scrutinizing a writer's story in terms of other stories: "While the critic admits . . . that he may be doing some injustice to the uniqueness of any single story in the process of showing the relationships among several, he recognizes that the relationships are unmistakably there, that one story does often illuminate another, that patterns emerge in the work of any good writer."[37]

Following Griffith's suggestion then (that "Powerhouse" represents a "kind of crystallization of Miss Welty's method as well as her most persistent themes"), I want to examine briefly several of the other stories from A Curtain of Green, particularly emphasizing the themes which develop out of the problem of human isolation. Such an approach is especially useful applied to Miss Welty's fiction, for often a single story is difficult to understand without some help in the form of an acquaintance with her dominant themes. One may hope that this process will result

in a better understanding of what "happens" in "Powerhouse," not by presenting the story simply as a replay of a persistent set of themes, but by suggesting that it expresses variations on themes presented variously in other stories.

Katherine Anne Porter finds "in none of these stories any trace of autobiography in the prime sense," but points out that in "A Memory" "there might be something of early personal history in the story of the child on the beach."[38] This seems a likely conclusion; the story is one of only two told from the first-person point of view (the other is "Why I Live at the P.O." and is obviously not autobiographical), and the narrator is a young "incipient artist."[39] Whether the story is in fact taken from Miss Welty's memory or whether it is purely a product of her imagination, it is a useful one with which to begin an examination of her themes.

A sensitive person with some artistic training, the young girl senses some great mystery about life, a mystery she attempts to identify by trying to reduce to order the things around her. "Ever since I had begun taking painting lessons, I had made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything" (p.147). She describes her surroundings as one would see them in a painting: "From my position I was looking at a rectangle brightly lit, actually glaring at me, with sun, sand, water, a little pavilion, a few solitary

people in fixed attitudes, and around it all a border of dark rounded oak trees, like the engraved thunderclouds surrounding illustrations in the Bible" (p. 147). She is at an age when she finds it necessary to make all of what she sees conform to her own privately constructed world. But "when a person, or a happening, seemed to me not in keeping with my opinion, or even my hope or expectation, I was terrified by a vision of abandonment and wildness which tore my heart with a kind of sorrow" (p. 148). Her examining of life is conducted in a "state of exaltation" brought on by the lure of imminent discovery: "It did not matter to me what I looked at; from my observation I would conclude that a secret of life had been nearly revealed to me--for I was obsessed with notions about concealment, and from the smallest gesture of a stranger I would wrest what was to me a communication or a presentiment" (pp. 148-149).

The smallest gesture of a stranger (and a negative gesture at that) had unaccountably caused her to fall in love. She had touched a boy's wrist in school one morning, and he had pretended to accept the touch as accidental; through such an insignificant happening, even though they "had never exchanged a word or even a nod of recognition," she had fallen in love, a condition which had "heightened, or even brought about" the state of exaltation that became her habit. "My love had somehow made me doubly austere

in my observations of what went on about me. Through some intensity I had come almost into a dual life, as observer and dreamer" (p. 149).

The dream world and the observed world had met on one occasion during the school year, and the result had been stunning. The boy had suddenly suffered a nosebleed, and "several of the older girls laughed at the confusion and distraction. . . . But this small happening which had closed in upon my friend was a tremendous shock to me; it was unforeseen, but at the same time dreaded; I recognized it, and suddenly I leaned heavily on my arm and fainted" (p. 150). The unforeseen and the dreaded had occurred and the dream had been powerless to prevent it, to ignore it, or to bring order to it.

The dream did remain, however, and the girl cherishes and nurtures it as she lies on the beach. But the observed world again intrudes, and for a time the two worlds coexist: "I still would not care to say which was more real--the dream I could make blossom at will, or the sight of the bathers." The scene and the action around her fill her with horror, for she again faces apparent meaningless chaos and vulgar human feelings or, rather, the lack of feeling. She is suddenly confronted with some bathers, "a group of loud, squirming, ill-assorted people who seemed thrown together only by the most confused accident, and who seemed driven

by foolish intent to insult each other, all of which they enjoyed with a hilarity which astonished my heart" (p. 152). They are a family; while the older of two boys runs "clumsily around the others, inflicting pinches, kicks, and idiotic sounds upon them," the parents and their daughter lie "in leglike confusion" on the sand. The man pours sand down the front of the woman's bathing suit, at which playfulness everyone laughs. The daughter joins the boys in a "senseless chase" (pp. 152-155).

The sensitive observer reacts to all of this by trying to shut it out, to retreat to the dream; but the dream world has been diminished by the observed world: "I closed my eyes upon them and their struggles but I could see them still, large and almost metallic, with painted smiles in the sun. . . . I tried to withdraw to my most inner dream . . . ; I felt the heavy weight of sweetness which always accompanied this memory; but the memory itself did not come to me" (pp. 155-156). She looks up and experiences the final outrage to her sensitive perception; the woman pulls down her bathing suit "in a condescending way" to empty out the sand. "I felt a peak of horror as though her breasts themselves had turned to sand, as though they were of no importance at all and she did not care" (p. 156). She sees <u>this</u> "smallest gesture of a stranger" as a denial of the sacredness of life.

The dream world is diminished when the coarseness, absurdity,

and ugliness of the observed world intrude upon it; but the dream (in this story) seems capable of regeneration: "I remember continuing to lie there, squaring my vision with my hands, trying to think ahead to the time of my return to school in winter. I could imagine the boy I loved walking into a classroom, where I would watch him with the hour on the beach accompanying my recovered dream and added to my love" (p. 157). The outer world might be terrifying at times when it cannot be made to conform to one's desire for order andmeaning, but the innter world generates a force equally unaccountable--the girl loves the boy for no reason, and sometimes "a look of unconcern and even stupidity on his face would dissipate my dream" (pp. 150-151)-- and this force is something of a protection and a salvation.

In "A Memory" the narrator encounters on the beach people whose vulgarity and treatment of each other--they don't care--offends deeply her sensibilities; but the threat which they pose to her inner life is not so devastating as that represented by the nosebleed. One can cope with and endure the recognition that people are often insensitive--the object of the girl's love seems no less obtuse than the people on the beach--but there is no defense against the unforeseen, the unexpected stroke of fate delivered by an unfathomable, chaotic universe. The chaos and confusion the bathers bring to the girl's "framed" world remind her of this

terror, and the ugliness of their actions amplifies it.

"A Memory" and "Powerhouse" are the only two stories in A Curtain of Green in which the protagonist as artist is faced with the conflict between love and fate. Several of the other stories examine this theme; few if any of them, however, present it as blackly as does "A Curtain of Green."

In this story we find Mrs. Larkin in her garden near the scene of recent tragedy. The previous summer her husband had ben killed, incredibly, with no warning, by a falling tree as he drove home from work. "From her place on the front porch she had spoken in a soft voice to him, never so intimate as at that moment, 'You can't be hurt.'" For some time after the event she had stood on the porch and tried to repeat those protective words "so as to change the whole happening. It was accident that was incredible, when her love for her husband was keeping him safe" (p. 214).

Since that demonstration of the futility of love against fate, she has immersed herself in her garden, as though seeking an answer to the mystery of nature. Unlike the girl in "A Memory," she no longer strives to make the outer world conform to the inner one; the shock of the accident has destroyed the impulse to find order in her life. "Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of this soil. . . . To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow an overflowering,

as if she consciously ventured forever a little farther, a little deeper, into the life in the garden" (p. 211).

Her isolation and her immersion in nature are pointed up in various descriptions throughout the first part of the story. The garden is surrounded by a "border of hedge, high like a wall," wherein she works "without stopping, almost invisibly, submerged all day among the thick, irregular, sloping beds of plants" (p. 210). We first discover her there by the light of the sun, which "like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure in its old pair of men's overalls" (p. 209). (The overalls, evidently her husband's, ironically protect her, though her love could not save him.)

Outside the hedge, secure in their upstairs bedrooms, neighbors can see Mrs. Larkin working. Occasionally they look down at her "as they brushed studiously at their hair in the morning; they found her place in the garden, . . . located her from their distance almost in curiosity, and then forgot her" (p. 212). They don't care; they have their ordered lives, which contrast with Mrs. Larkin's abandoned one--she works on with her hair "streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it" (p. 210).

Since the accident Mrs. Larkin's only motivation seems to be to see that nothing dies; she is constantly transplanting, but to no practical purpose; she never sends flowers to anyone and "if she thought of <u>beauty</u> at all . . . , she certainly did not strive

for it in her garden" (p. 212). She feels no need, and perhaps lacks the ability, to communicate: "People said she never spoke" (p. 213). On this day, which is different from other days--on every day until this one, as if in keeping with Mrs. Larkin's monotonous routine, it had rained at two o'clock--she is moved by a sudden stillness around her to call to Jamey, a Negro boy who helps her with the transplanting. "But her voice hardly carried in the dense garden" (p. 214). "She walked nearer to him--he must have been deaf" (p. 215). In this garden there is no communication; it is only an "arcade of identity."

The stillness produces terror in her, "as though her loneliness had been pointed out by some outside force whose finger parted the hedge" (p. 215). The monotonous routine of a summer when it rains every day at the same time (in itself incredible) has been broken this day when it does not rain on schedule; even the senseless ritual of her immersion in nature is interrupted by an unexpected change from without. She seeks Jamey, but he is lost "in some impossible dream of his own" (p. 215), and approaching him from behind, she suddenly raises her hoe over his head. Suspended there momentarily, she considers striking this head, described scenically (as if its mystery were identified with the mystery of nature), "with its clustered hot wooly hair, its intricate, glistening ears, its small brown branching streams

of sweat, the bowed head holding so obviously and so deadly its ridiculous dream." The dream is as impenatrable as the mystery of nature, but now <u>she</u> holds the instrument of life and death. But she knows deeply, "from the effect of a man's danger and death, its cause in oblivion," and she is "too helpless to defy the workings of accident, of life and death, of unaccountability" (p. 216). She can not use the hoe (which she has used to preserve life) to inflict death. She asks ceaselessly, "Was it not possible to compensate? to punish? to protest?" (p. 217). At this moment it begins to rain and she lowers the hoe. The sound of the rain is gentle and full--"the sound of the end of waiting." It signals the final submission of her will: "against that which was inexhaustible, there was no defense" (p. 218). Mrs. Larkin sinks down among the flowers, finally immersed, utterly defeated, bereft of compensation and protest. Is there any hope for regeneration through total submissiveness? Miss Welty hints at this possibility. Jamey calls her name until she stirs: "'Miss Lark! Miss Lark!'" (p. 219). She has shed her title of marriage and become a creature of nature; if this is a clumsy piece of wordplay, we do recall that in her terror induced by the sudden stillness of the garden she felt a force which "babbled to her, The bird that flies within your heart could not divide this cloudy air" (p. 215). Perhaps

the "lark in" her heart has been released.

The mystery of fate and the terror of the life-flux on a despairing individual is examined again in "Flowers for Marjorie," one of several of Miss Welty's stories in which alienation is tied to rootlessness. Howard and Marjorie, his pregnant wife, natives of Mississippi, are living in New York. Unable to find a job, Howard is oppressed by his strange surroundings: "It was hard to remember, in this city of dark, nervous, loud-spoken women, that in Victory, Mississippi, all girls were like Marjorie--and that Marjorie was in turn like his home. . . . Or was she?" (p. 194). Her pregnancy has erected a barrier between them, making her insensitive to the bewilderment Howard is feeling: "Marjorie often seemed remote now, or it might have been the excess of life in her rounding body that made her never notice any more the single and lonely life around her, the very pressing life around her" (p. 194).

The inexorable passing of time adds to Howard's despair. He hasn't worked for a long time, and soon his wife is to have a baby. "'How long before your time comes?'" he asks, and she replies, "'Oh Howard, can't you keep track of the time?'" (p. 196). "The ticks of the cheap alarm clock grew louder and louder as he buried his face against her, feeling new desperation every moment in the time-marked softness and the pulse of her sheltering

body" (p. 191), as he begins to identify his frustration with the passing of time with her placid acceptance of it. The impending birth is an affront to him. He has lost track of time and he wants to deny its existence, but there is Marjorie to remind him of it. "'Nothing can stop me from having the baby, that's sure,'" she says, further inciting his feeling of helplessness (p. 196). Swinging his leather purse "like a little pendulum," he accuses her: "You may not know it, but you're the only thing left in the world that hasn't stopped!'" (p. 198). Shortly thereafter he protests as Mrs. Larkin was unable to; he kills Marjorie with a butcher knife and throws the alarm clock out of the window (p. 200). But fate will not allow the protest to go by without punishment.

Leaving the apartment to walk through the city, Howard is cruelly assaulted by an incredible stream of good fortune and reminders of his deed. On Sixth Avenue he sees a window full of colored prints of the Virgin Mary; in a novelty shop there is a box with a "bulb attached to a long tube, with the printed sign, "'Palpitator--the Imitation Heart. Show her you Love her'" (p. 201). In the tunnel of a subway he sees inscribed on the wall, "'God sees me, God sees me, God sees me, God sees me.'" In the train he looks at the advertisements and sees "many couples embracing and smiling," and he hears a beggar sing "'Let Me Call You

Sweetheart'" (p. 203). He enters a bar and with his last nickel hits the jackpot in a slot machine. To cap off the trip, he becomes the ten millionth person to enter Radio City, where he is presented with an armful of roses and the key to the city. A short time before, he could not communicate with his wife, and now he is to "'broadcast over a nation-wide red-and-blue network'" (p. 205). Newsmen ask him terrible questions: "'What is your occupation?' 'Are you married?'" (p. 206). He flees to the apartment with the key to the city and the roses, finds the clock on the sidewalk, and discovers Marjorie just as he had left her. "Then Howard knew for a fact that everything had stopped. It was just as he feared, just as he had dreamed. He had had a dream to come true" (p. 207).

All of this irony, much of it blatant, makes this grim comedy one of Miss Welty's most contrived stories, perhaps because she is not writing about Mississippi.[40] The theme of alienation through rootlessness is more subtly and carefully handled in her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" (1936). This time the protagonist comes to see the emptiness in his life contrasted with the vitality of simple rural people, and the shock of recognition coupled with his inability to change the deep-ingrained values of his life experience kills him. R. J. Bowman, the salesman, is "back on the road after a long siege of influenza.

He had had very high fever and dreams . . . and he could not think clearly."[41] His recall of the places he has stayed underscores the isolation of his past life: "He could only remember little rooms within little rooms, like a nest of Chinese paper boxes" (p. 232). He knows all the roads, in contrast to the simple people he passes, who "never knew where the very roads they lived on went to; but then he had not even been close enough to anyone to call out. . . . The stares of these distant people had followed solidly like a wall, impenetrable, behind which they turned back after he had passed" (pp. 233-234).

Escaping from his car before it falls into a ravine, he approaches a lonely house in the desolate hill country. At the sight of a woman in the passage his heart begins to behave "like a rocket set off," and it is the knowledge he gains through her which ultimately kills him. The effect of her simple rooted life with her husband causes a "curious and strong emotion" to seize him: "he wanted to leap up, to say to her, I have been sick and I found out then, only then, how lonely I am, . . . protesting against emptiness" (p. 243). But it <u>is</u> too late; the woman in her completeness recalls to him his vision of his empty life experienced during his illness, but the smooth-talking salesman is inarticulate in her presence: "He felt ashamed and exhausted by the thought that he might, in one more moment, have tried by

simple words and embraces to communicate some strange thing--something which seemed always to have just escaped him" (p. 244). He has the knowledge that something has been wrong in his life, but he is too rooted in the rootlessness of that life to endure or fully understand the secret of this husband and wife. His last words are a retreat to the habitual communication patterns which represent the shallowness of his career: "'There will be special reduced prices on all footwear during the month of January'" (p. 252), he babbles, and we recall that the woman who so strangely affects him is taciturn and wears no shoes. As the salesman obeys his impulse to leave during the night, he sees "that the woman had never got through with cleaning the lamp" (p. 253) she had been cleaning and holding throughout his stay. Earlier he had felt "as if she had shown him something secret, part of her life, but had offered no explanation" (p. 245). The woman had provided light sufficient for him to recognize his lack of identity, but she could not provide a final answer. The whole truth in existence is unobtainable, and for some people partial insight is unbearable.

All four of these stories demand more thorough investigation than I have presented here, but my concern has been primarily with theme; they illustrate more seriously and comprehensively than most of the other stories variations on the problem of isolation.

Further variations and similar strains appear everywhere in A Curtain of Green. The salesman in "The Hitch-hikers" is very much like Mr. Bowman: "On the road he did some things rather out of a dream." The sight of hitch-hikers reminds him of a sensation he had as a child, "standing still, with nothing to touch him, feeling tall and having the world come all at once into its round shape underfoot and rush and turn through space and make his stand very precarious and lonely" (pp. 121-122). He feels separated even from the violence that has occurred (one of the two hitch-hikers he picked up has killed the other): "there had been other violence not of his doing--other fights, . . . unheralded confessions, sudden love-making--none of any of this his, not his to keep, but belonging to the people of these towns he passed through, coming out of their rooted pasts, . . . coming out of their time" (p. 141). There is poor Clytie, who seeks "to comprehend the eyes and the mouths of other people, which concealed she knew not what, and secretly asked for still another unknown thing" (p. 163), who tries to escape the house of hate in which she lives, to open a window to the world, and who drowns herself when she sees her own reflection in a rain barrel. Even within the bonds of marriage isolation is a problem: the couple in "The Whistle," oppressed and beaten by poverty and the weather, can not articulate to each other their feeling of resignation (though there does seem to be

mutual understanding between them); the married deafmutes in "The Key," though brought together in a private world of hand-signals, have each of them a private dream world, which (particularly in the man's case) tends to operate to the exclusion of the spouse; and there is Ruby Fisher in "A Piece of News," whose sense of isolation in the backwoods provokes her to infidelity (apparently on several occasions) and to creating from a news clipping (another Ruby Fisher was reported shot in the leg by her husband) a fantasy wherein she dies at the hands of her husband, beautifully, romantically, in a brand-new nightgown.[42]

Miss Welty's exploration of the problems of isolation is too complex and multi-faceted to allow a concise summary; perhaps even a precise one is not possible. However, I would like to attempt some kind of recapitulation.

For each person there are two great mysteries--the mystery of the personality and that of the outer world. Neither of these yields to final resolution; both the outer forces (fate and nature) and the personality are unaccountable. The individual seeks to impose order on the chaos around him; but this is not always possible, for sometimes things happen for no apparent reason or from no discernible cause. Part of the mystery of the personality consists in the need to love, to communicate that love, to transcend isolation. But love and communication are often thwarted, by fate,

by society (people don't care, and communication requires reception), or by one's own inability to express love. Then, too, as necessary as love and communication may be, there is also the sacred inviolability of the self, an untouchable region which often encourages separation. Man's condition consists, then, in a fluctuating set of relationships between himself, his fellow man, and the universe, all of which are mysteries, beautiful and terrifying.

Love, separateness, communication, fate--these are the threads from which "Powerhouse" is woven. Most obviously the story reveals what Robert Daniel believes is Miss Welty's "most characteristic theme: the counterpoint of human love . . . and human loneliness."[43] And it is clearly representative of her most persistent method--the use of the grotesque and of fantasy. Powerhouse is described in grotesque terms--his eyelids are "maybe horny like a lizard's"; he has "African feet of the greatest size," a mouth "like a monkey's," a "great head, fat stomach, and little round piston legs, and long yellow-sectioned strong big fingers, at rest about the size of bananas" (pp. 254-255). The fantasy in the story is in his tale, which is not lacking in grotesque description: "There he [Uranus Knockwood] is, coming around that corner, and Gypsy kadoodling down, oh-oh, watch out! Ssssst! Plooey! See, there she is in her little old nightgown, and her

insides and brains all scattered round" (p. 268). But the main interest in the story is in the theme: the relationships between love and separateness, with communication a corollary of the first and fate a contributing factor in the second.

The fact of isolation is suggested and reinforced by the setting; it is raining[44]; Powerhouse and his musicians are playing at a white dance in a strange town. He is anything but close to the white community, but his alienation is more Joe Christmas than Jim Crow, for he is not at home in Negrotown either, not literally or figuratively. The white people at the dance circle the bandstand trying to grasp the mystery the performers seem to contain, but there is a sense of condescension and reserve: "Sometimes they [the whites] steal glances at one another, as if to say, Of course you know how it is with <u>them</u>--Negroes--band leaders--they would play the same way, giving all they've got, for an audience of one" (p. 259). (Unrestrained emotion is part of "Negroness." Civilized [white] people do not indulge in it.) But Powerhouse is not really a Negro: "he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian" (p. 254). To the Negro community he is a legend; but when the local hero is presented to him, there is no communication between them; the hero is inarticulate and "Powerhouse looks at him seekingly" (p. 269). He is isolated even from "the far section of the band . . .

--they don't count" (p. 257).

Like the two traveling salesmen, he is alienated by his role as a wanderer suffering from rootlessness, a dominant theme in the blues music he plays.[45] The band is committed to traveling: "They can't stay. They'll be somewhere else this time tomorrow" (p. 256). The waitress asks, "'You passing through?'" and the reply adds great weight to the question: "'Now you got everything right'" (pp. 265-266). Powerhouse himself, with his "wandering-Jew eyebrows," is "in motion every moment--what could be more obscene? . . . He's going all the time, like skating around the skating rink or rowing a boat" (p. 255). He gets the band ready to play with a question: "'You-all ready to do some serious walking'?"[46] His traveling life separates him (perhaps tragically) from his wife, Gypsy, whose name contributes to the theme of wandering. And the action of the story consists in a journey--from the private world of the bandstand to the World Cafe and back again. In both worlds he loses track of where he is: in the cafe he asks, "What you tell me the name of this place?'" (p. 265); and in his private world he loses track of place and time: "'What the hell place is this? Where is my watch and chain?'" The watch "rides on Powerhouse's great stomach, down where he can never see it" (p. 261). Finally, his isolation is heightened by his artistic sensitivity. Like the girl in "A Memory," he seeks meaning in the smallest gesture, a habit of

mind that is bound to provoke occasional loneliness and separation from less sensitive people.

Counterpoint to separateness is love in the story. Powerhouse "loves the way they all play too--all those next to him" (p. 257). There are really only two musicians with whom he achieves something approaching complete rapport. Valentine, the bass player, and Little Brother, the clarinetist, are (musically) extensions of his right and left hands. Their names suggest kinds of love, as does the name of the local hero, Sugar-Stick Thompson,[47] an instinctive "performer," who has pulled up fourteen "drownded" white people from July Creek without knowing how to swim.

Love and separateness are harmonized in Powerhouse's tale of Gypsy, whose love he has lost (he says) because of her loneliness for him: "'She say, What do I hear? Footsteps walking up the hall? That him? Footsteps go on off. It's not me. . . . She says, All right! I'll jump out the window then'" (p. 267). If Gypsy's death is a fabrication, it remains evident that Powerhouse's need for love is at least partially a product of his isolation and wandering. Love and separateness are underscored by the song titles mentioned in the story: "Pagan Love Song," "Tuxedo Junction" (Powerhouse wears a tuxedo and he is at a kind of junction), "Empty Bed Blues,"[48] "Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today," and "Somebody Loves Me." The lyrics of "San," a song the

band plays after intermission, might easily represent either Powerhouse's or Gypsy's questioning lament (Powerhouse asks himself, "What the hell was she trying to do?")

> Why have you gone away?
> You said you loved me,
> But if you loved me,
> Why did you act this way?
> If I had ever been untrue to you,
> What you have done would be the thing to do.
> But my heart aches, dear,
> And it will break, dear,
> If you don't come back home again to San.

And the lyrics to "Somebody Loves Me" recall Clytie searchingly scrutinizing faces, looking for love:

> Somebody loves me, I wonder who.
> I wonder who she can be
> . . . . . .
> For every girl who passes me I shout, "Hey, maybe,
> You were meant to be my loving baby."
> Somebody loves me, I wonder who.
> Maybe it's you!

Powerhouse's love encounters fate, the "mystery deeper than danger" which hung around the boy in "A Memory." Even if we don't know what really happened, we do know that whatever it was, Powerhouse interprets it as something unaccountable, some unexpected message from Uranus Knockwood (fate). If it <u>is</u> true that he talked with Gypsy the previous night on the telephone, and that she <u>did</u> threaten suicide then, as Little Brother says, "'You ain't going to expect people doing what they says over long distance'" (p. 262). Powerhouse needs to identify fate somehow

in order to cope with it; he personifies it in the form of Uranus Knockwood, a name that's "on a star." Fate is always hovering near; and though Powerhouse can pretend to identify it, it remains too elusive to grasp: Knockwood is "'that no-good pussyfooted crooning creeper, that creeper that follow around after me, coming up like weeds behind me, following around after me everything I do . . . ; when I going out he just coming in'" (pp. 267-268). "'He take our lives when we gone!'" (clearly fate is responsible, in Powerhouse's mind, for whatever happened to Gypsy): "'He come in when we goes out!'" and "'He go out when we comes in!'" (p. 269). Powerhouse cries, "'I got him now! I got my eye on him,'" and sends Knockwood a message which he assures everyone will "'reach him and come out the other side'" (p. 272), but we might suspect that it will come out the other side because Knockwood is only a product of the imagination; fate is too deep a mystery to be absolutely identified and dealt with. Powerhouse himself concedes that his fantasy falls short of absolute truch: "'It ain't the truth. . . . Truth is something worse, I ain't said what, yet'" (p. 270). The best he can do is <u>create</u> a privately ordered world to sustain him. We see him bringing confusion to order on the bandstand: "Before a number the band is all frantic, misbehaving, pushing like children in a schoolroom, and he is the teacher getting silence" (p. 256). But in the world

(cafe) we find baffling unteleological events. The nickelodeon responds with silence to the request for "Empty Bed Blues," then unaccountably plays "Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today." Sugar-Stick Thompson, for no conceivable reason, "saves" people who are already dead. The imagination can come out to meet the world: indeed, it is often compelled to, but the mysteries are finally insoluble.

Powerhouse's fantasy is his way of meeting the world; in doing so he is firmly in the blues tradition: "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[49] Powerhouse's tale alternately terrifies and convulses with laughter his auditors; it is his way of making what Warren sees in many of Miss Welty's stories as "the vital effort. The effort is a 'mystery' because it is in terms of the effort, doomed to failure but essential, that the human manifests itself as human."[50] Warren might agree that in this case the failure of the effort is surely not certain. Through his fantasy, Powerhouse purges his sorrow and regenerates his inner life. He imaginatively turns the tables on fate; Knockwood, who takes wives away, this time has a corpse on his hands, one which Powerhouse has "killed." Purged of his sorrow by

his imagination, he can send off the message to Knockwood: "'What in the hell you talking about? Don't make any difference: I gotcha'" (p. 271). He recognizes, of course, that his fantasy is not the truth, but it sustains him nevertheless.

All of this should not obscure his role as communicator, as the powerhouse, a source of energy. The telephone and telegraph in the story remind us of the communication motif,[51] but we see that communication on a deeper level depends upon willing receptivity. "Powerhouse has as much as possible done by signals," and "what they say to one another in another language" (p. 256) adds to the musicians' mystery for the white audience (we are reminded of the hand signals of the deafmutes in "The Key"); but the only real communication is between Powerhouse and those who respond to and contribute to his dream. Only Little Brother and Valentine do this; in this context their names suggest the connection between love and communication.

The thematic material in "Powerhouse" is very much related to the themes which, to varying degrees, can be found in all of the stories in A Curtain of Green. This is not to say that Miss Welty is simply repeating herself; the stories represent constant variations upon the fact of isolation. In "Powerhouse" the mysteries which adhere to that fact are given yet another turn. In this story we find a human being presented as helpless against,

but able to endure, the mystery of fate, needing and being deprived of love, needing to make the vital effort, doing his best in an absurd universe; but he is also presented as a life force, a distillation into human form of the power of nature. Like the universe in constant flux, "he is in motion every moment--what could be more obscene?"; "He is so monstrous he sends everybody into oblivion" (p. 255). The waitress is so awed by his presence she says that "'The Mississippi River's here'" (p. 266). He is mountainous in size, and "his mouth gets to be nothing but a volcano" (273).

In Miss Welty's general view the personality is at bottom as deep a mystery as the outer world, of which it is, after all, a part. But Powerhouse is a case apart; none of the characters anyshere in A Curtain of Green match him in intensity. The intensity springs from his role as lover-artist-communicator and from his affirmative answer to the questions posed by Mrs. Larkin; it is possible to compensate, to protest, to punish. His role and his answer are enhanced and reinforced in the story through a series of symbolic suggestions based on man's age-old way of expressing life's mysteries; Powerhouse, a legend in his own time, has mythological forebears.

II Myth in "Powerhouse"

Against the tendency on the part of many critics to regard her as merely a regional writer, Miss Welty has responded vigorously, particularly in her essay "Place in Fiction": "I think the sense of Place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind. . . . Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. . . . It never really stops informing us for it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself."[1] Furthermore, "it seems likely that the art that speaks most clearly, most explicitly, directly, and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood. It is through Place that we put down roots . . . but where these roots reach toward is the deep and running vein of the human understanding."[2]

Granville Hicks sympathizes with this view: "She is a writer with roots, a fact significantly reflected in all her work. But if she shares in the heritage of the South, she also shares in the literary tradition of Western civilization. . . . And not only that: she proves, as the good regionalists have always proved, that the deeper one goes into the heart of a region, the more one transcends its geographical boundaries."[3]

For Miss Welty, one way of transcending the geographical

boundaries of her region lies in finding (or even creating) in that region mythic elements which parallel those of other times and other places. We know from Katherine Anne Porter that "always, from the beginning until now, she loved folk tales, fairy tales, old legends, and she likes to listen to the songs and stories of people who live in old communities whose culture is recollected and bequeathed orally."[4] If there is any validity to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, then a great deal can be learned by paying close attention to the tales and legends of any region, for they are part of a great repository, wherein man's innermost fears, noblest hopes and deeds, and deepest passions can be found.[5]

Robert Penn Warren, whose essay represents the first critical attempt to get past Miss Welty's grotesque characters and strange situations, evidently was among the first to notice her use of the materials of myth. Discussing the stories in A Wide Net, he observes that "Floyd, the untamed creature of uncertain origin, is William Wallace dancing with the great catfish at his belt, the river god. But he is also, like the buck in 'Livvie,' a field god, riding the red horse in a pasture of butterflies."[6]

Warren mentions nothing of this sort going on in A Curtain of Green, and, indeed, Miss Welty's use of mythology seems to have progressed roughly in proportion to her use of fantasy--chronolcgically

it increased and became more complex. Writing about her third collection, The Golden Apples (1949), Harry C. Morris notes the obvious--"she has stretched the canvas of the work over a framework of the classic myths"--and approaches her use of Greek mythology in three ways: "the use of myth as a means for ordering contemporary history, the reestablishing of myths in modern terms and the linking of them to their ancient counterparts, and the use of myth as a movement toward structural control and sharply delinated [sic] form."[7] This is all to the good, but Morris seems quite unaware that Miss Welty had made use of ancient myth and done so in a specific way (using names rather than creating nameless river and field gods) before The Golden Apples. "Nevertheless," he says, "at this stage in her work Delta Wedding (1946) she had not associated her local myths with those of the ancients."[8] "With the exception of a story which appeared in the Autumn 1949 Accent, "Put Me in the Sky," Miss Welty has not given name to a classical figure in those stories where she uses the early myths."[9] Morris has overlooked a good deal.

William M. Jones does better: "From her earliest published work to her latest collection of stories Miss Welty has drawn heavily upon the worlds of myth and folklore and, while handling many of the same motifs again and again, has consistently absorbed them more and more fully into her own meaning. . . . Quite

consciously Miss Welty has taken the characters common to several mythological systems and translated them into present-day Mississippians. . . . Since her first published story she has been working toward a fusion of the universal mythic elements embodied in various culture-heroes with the regional world that she knows first-hand."[10] Jones points to several instances in the Curtain of Green stories where names of classical figures contribute to the stories. There is old Phoenix in "A Worn Path," whose skin is golden (the color of the original Phoenix) and who makes periodic journeys for medicine to sustain her grandson: "Then 'there came a flicker and then a flame,' after which 'Phoenix rose carefully.'" Jones finds Clytie's counterpart in Ovid's Metamorphoses and reminds us that it is old Lethy who finds Clytie drowned in the rain barrel: "What promise for Clytie's soul that she is discovered by the river of forgetfulness!"[11]

Chester Eisinger, stating that many critics have used "more zeal than judgment" in tracing Miss Welty's mythological sources, makes a valuable point about her use of mythology:

> I think it is clear that Miss Welty uses myth, but she is not inclined to take over whole any single myth. Since she tends to work by indirection, she might be expected to give out hints rather than fully completed analogues. Her practice in the short stories shows her relying on association and allusion more than on direct borrowing. . . . Miss Welty, I daresay, is content to juxtapose the two Phoenixes and permit them to nourish each other in the reader's imagination. . . . Despite the fact

> that Miss Welty is obviously conscious of the mythic tradition as she writes, the reader must guard against the temptation . . . to find a schematic rendering of mythic materials in her stories. It is the spirit or the idea of some myths that she calls upon to lend authority, weight, or timelessness to some of her stories.[12]

Miss Welty does more than allude to figures from ancient myths for some symbolic purpose; the allusions are there, and they do add weight to the stories, but the stories themselves sometimes achieve, as Hicks points out, "something of the quality of fable. In . . . a couple of short stories she has deliberately created legends of her own, but these are less important than the tales in which the ordinary events of life in contemporary Mississippi take on the purity and--to use a reckless word--the universality of legend."[13]

Though all of these critics (with the exception of Eisinger, who writes about her fiction in general) are concerned chiefly with Miss Welty's use of myth in her later work, it seems clear that their observations are equally applicable to "Powerhouse." In this story myth <u>is</u> reestablished in modern terms; Miss Welty <u>has</u> fused universal mythic elements with her own regional world; she has not simply taken over a single myth, nor are there fully completed analogues; and the story itself achieves something of what Hicks calls the quality of fable.

Hicks confesses that "it is not easy to say how she has learned" to achieve this quality,[14] but surely it has something to

do with the point of view. In their anthology, Points of View, editors James Moffet and Kenneth McElheny place this story in a category which they designate "anonymous narration--no character point of view," commenting, "These stories resemble fairy tales, legends, and myths, which frequently omit character point of view and the inner life."[15] Now I don't believe that the point of view in "Powerhouse" holds still sufficiently to be classified,[16] but I do agree that, generally speaking, the narrator is not characterized, that the inner life is not given, and that this manner of narration does contribute to the fabulous aura of the story.

The point of view is appropriate, for the story focuses on Powerhouse, described by Appel as a folk hero: "In his excesses he is a virtual Negro Paul Bunyan, or perhaps an image of John Henry as jazzman."[17] In the Negro folk tradition no figure is more likely to achieve legendary status than a jazz musician; moreover, jazz virtuosity is often nearly equated with manhood, and the education of a jazz musician can be seen in terms of ritual: "After learning the fundamentals of his instrument and the techniques and standard repertoire of jazz, the 'apprentice' jazzman must attempt to find his own unique 'voice' on his instrument, must, in essence, find his soul and be reborn as an artist, and must again 'test' himself in the fiercely competitive arena of the jam session--an act of self-discovery and renewal that finds its parallel . . . in the

archetypal cycle of the ordeal, initiation ceremony, and rebirth."[18]

Powerhouse has survived the ordeal and initiation of the jazz "ceremony," and he achieves a renewal of the spirit through artistic creation. The initiation motif is emphasized in the experience of Sugar-Stick Thompson, the local hero who plunged "'down to the bottom of July Creek and pulled up all those drownded white people fall out of a boat'" (p. 269). Referring to other works by Miss Welty, Jones writes of "an idea common to folklore which holds a central position in much of her work, the idea that a descent into the depths results in a fuller awareness of life."[19] Moreover, "according to Miss Welty, the riches gained from the descent are frequently a fuller understanding of nature."[20] We don't know what knowledge Sugar-Stick might have gained, for he is inarticulate when we meet him, but his descent points to Powerhouse, who, when playing, "seems lost--down in the song, yelling up like somebody in a whirlpool" (p. 257). If he gains a fuller understanding of nature, it seems to be in the form of a reconciliation and a renewed desire to carry on: "Powerhouse throws back his vast head into the steaming rain, and a look of hopeful desire seems to blow somehow like a vapor from his dilated nostrils over his face and bring a mist to his eyes" (p. 272). He has learned to endure the mysterious forces which give, take away, and renew life.

Powerhouse is a legend in his own time--the Negroes follow him from the dance to the cafe, where the waitress says that people have been saying he is the famous Powerhouse and that they have recognized him from his picture (p. 265). As a folk hero, he loves, he communicates through his art, he hints at mysterious secrets, and he endures. To emphasize these roles, the story calls upon several ancient myths. Benjamin Griffith finds "Powerhouse" suggestive of several of these:

> Miss Welty, in referring to the pianist's laying "his finger on a key with the promise and serenity of a sibyl touching the book" appears to be suggesting a comparison between Powerhouse and the Cumaean Sibyl. Powerhouse "looks like a preacher" (prophet; "he's in a trance"); he listens as much as he performs; a look of hideous, powerful rapture on his face." In the World Cafe Powerhouse speaks in symbols to the waitress, "his eyes opening lazily as in a cave." A description in the Aeneid, Book VI, could well apply to Powerhouse as he frightens the people in the cafe with his gruesome and symbolic story: "The Sibyl of Cumae chants from the shrine her perplexing terrors, echoing through the cavern truth wrapped in obscurity." Even the peripatetic nature of Powerhouse is fitting, for the Cumaean Sibyl is sometimes identified in tradition with the Erythraen Sibyl, who wandered to various countries.

In another sense, Powerhouse is a Promethean figure, bound by his art to his piano (at one point "he looks over the end of the piano, as if over a cliff") just as the Titan was chained to a rock on a precipice of the Caucusus. Like the Shelleyan Prometheus, Powerhouse has a secret which he will not reveal. . . . Prometheus withholds his secret in order to allow Jupiter's overthrow. Powerhouse sits in the World Café beneath a dangling peacock feather, usually a symbol of Juno. The peacock

> feather is mentioned twice in the story, and unless it is to be assumed to symbolize resurrection (as it does in Christian symbolism) or the all-seeing eyes of the Argos Panoptes, it could well point toward the Promethean myth--by way of a Juno--Jupiter--Prometheus transference.[21]

If it is persuasive (and I think much of it is) all of this serves to refute Jones's somewhat oversimplified analysis of Miss Welty's use of myth in her earlier work: "At first Miss Welty seems to have thought of a myth, then thought of ways in which to modernize and southernize it."[22] The only observation Jones makes regarding "Powerhouse" is that it is one story in which she "makes use of a specific name from folk knowledge as a point of departure for the story itself." In a footnote to that sentence he states that "Uranus appears in a story about a titanic Negro pianist, 'Powerhouse.'"[23] It is difficult to believe that Miss Welty was mulling over the Uranus legend one day and decided to make a story out of it--but it is curious that Griffith, who goes so much farther into mythic sources than Jones, omits the only proper name of ancient origin in the story.

Edith Hamilton describes the Uranus myth:

> The first creatures who had the appearance of life were the children of Mother Earth and Father Heaven (Gaea and Ouranos). They were monsters. . . . They had the shattering, overwhelming strength of earthquake and hurricane and volcano. . . . . .
> It was natural to think of these fearful creations

> as the children of Mother Earth, brought forth from her dark depths when the world was young. But it is extremely odd that they were also the children of Heaven. However, that was what the Greeks said, and they made Heaven out to be a very poor father.[24]

Powerhouse is described in the story as "so monstrous he sends everybody into oblivion" (p. 255) with a mouth that "gets to be nothing but a volcano" (p. 273). He and his band, the "Tasmanians," are creatures of the underworld; Tasmania is south of Australia--down under--and was a former British penal colony (Uranus hated some of his sons and as "each was born he imprisoned it in a secret place in the earth"[25]). Powerhouse describes the place where the musicians stay: "'way downstairs along a long cor-ri-dor where they puts us'" (p. 261). And "once when [Little Brother] played a low note, Powerhouse muttered in dirty praise, 'He went clear downstairs to get that one'" (p. 258). Descended figuratively from Uranus, Powerhouse defies him and renders him powerless. The Titan Cronus, one of Uranus's sons, castrates him to save the imprisoned sons of Mother Earth, and Prometheus, another Titan, saves man from destruction with the gift of fire.[26] It may be overingenious to argue that Powerhouse is a savior, but he does tune the band by howling "'A, D,'" (not, as Miss Welty probably knows, the notes customarily used to tune horns), and there is that volcano mouth of his. If he does "save" any people, it is through his ability to communicate his vision

and vitality to those who will partake of them, notably the musicians close to him and, to a lesser degree, the Negro community.

Powerhouse deals with Uranus in the World Café; leading a magnificent group improvisation, he cuts him down to size; fate, whose descendants, in a sense, we all are, is not so imposing after all: "'You know him.'" "'Middle-sized man.'" "'Wears a hat.'" "'That's him.'" After this exchange "everybody in the room moans with pleasure" (p. 269). Even the local Negroes sense what Powerhouse is getting at--if not so completely as the musicians, certainly more so than the white community ever could. The Negroes know about Uranus Knockwood.

Powerhouse is not content to abandon the story after leaving the World Café. On the way back to the dance hall the musicians must all "play" it again. In the form of a spelling exercise each takes a chorus or so on the theme of Knockwood's name. In light of the Uranus myth the possible combinations yield fascinating results. The spellers can have "You ran us (into this underworld), you rein us, you reign us, you're a noose, Knockwood," or even, in contempt, "your anus, Knockwood!"[27] Considering that "the Giants, the fourth race of monsters, sprang up from his blood, "[28] we can stretch the spelling bee to include "You rain us, Knockwood," or "You're in us, Knockwood." And because fate is responsible for Gypsy's death, we

might include, "your onus, Knockwood." "They spell it all the ways it could be spelled. It puts them in a wonderful humor" (p. 271). Now Powerhouse, purged of his sorrow, can send off the message: "'What in the hell you talkin' about? Don't make any difference: I gotcha'" (p. 271). Fate can be endured: it can be recognized, confronted, defied, accepted, and dismissed through the creative regenerative powers of communicated art.

In addition to the Uranus myth and those suggested by Griffith the story brings to mind Orpheus, a master musician, descended from the gods, whose wife dies from the sting of a viper--an accident, unforeseen and unaccountable--and who descends into the underground in a vain attempt to bring her back (we should not expect complete analogues). As a traveler he saves the Argonauts from the Sirens by drowning out their own music of death with his own: "When the heroes were weary or the rowing was especially difficult he would strike his lyre and they would be aroused to fresh zeal and their oars would smite the sea together in time to the melody."[29] There is Powerhouse on the way back to the dance, continuing his fantasy: when the other musicians "get a little tired" (p. 271), he urges them into the spelling bee and restores their spirits. Finally, we might think of Odysseus, at whose hands the Sirens are foiled again; he too is a traveler who left a wife at home and who was treated ill by the gods. He too endured.

Powerhouse himself is a myth-maker in two senses: first, he

makes himself a folk hero through his musical virtuosity; and second, he creates the Knockwood myth. The ancient myths reinforce the story of this modern myth-maker; they indeed lend "authority, weight and timeliness" to a story which very much "transcends its geographical boundaries."

III Portrait of the Artist as Jazz Musician

Eudora Welty's conviction that a sense of place is of great importance to a fictional work leads her to remark, as many writers have remarked, that "writers must always write best of what they know."[1] Although she is speaking here primarily of how place informs and inspires a writer's sensibilities, we might expect (if we demand utter consistency) that, in writing a story about a jazz piano player as effective as "Powerhouse" is, she is drawing on her own knowledge of music. Even if we did not know that she studied the piano as a child[2] and that "she loves music, listens to a great deal of it, all kinds,"[3] we might suspect from "Powerhouse" itself that she is on familiar ground. The vocabulary is certainly genuine: Powerhouse, the jazz player, is constantly "improvising" (p. 254); he kicks against the floor "to communicate the tempo" (p. 256); he goes "up the keyboard . . . in some very derogatory triplet-routine" (p. 257); he "uses all his right hand on a trill" (p. 273); the band plays "choruses"; and after Scoot's question about calling Gypsy on the telephone, "there is a measure of silence" (p. 272). But it is not only vocabulary that indicates her awareness of music and particularly of the jazz idiom: playing "Pagan Love Song," a waltz, Powerhouse "puts 4/4 over the 3/4,"[4] a strategem employed with some frequency in jazz playing. And at the end of "Somebody Loves Me" Powerhouse's

thrice articulated "Maybe" is precisely the way the lyrics in this song would fall in a traditional tag-ending. Finally, her awareness of the blues tradition in Negro folklore jibes with the structure of "Pagan Love Song," "the one waltz [the band] will ever consent to play--by request" (p. 259), the "sad song" Powerhouse is playing when he begins his tale. It is virtually a sixteen-bar blues, constructed from the same chords--I, IV, and V--which comprise the standard twelve-bar blues numbers, and it lends itself readily to blues treatment.

Miss Welty's rendering of Powerhouse playing is strikingly similar to Whitney Balliett's description of Mary Lou Williams, a jazz pianist, at work at New York's Hickory House: "Her head and her face were in steady, graceful motion. Sometimes, her eyes still shut, she moved her head counterclockwise in an intense, halting manner, punctuated with rhythmic downward jabs. When she was pleased by something her bassist or her drummer did, she rocked gently back and forth, partly opened her eyes, and smiled."[5] Powerhouse is evidently more vigorous than the ladylike Miss Williams, but he too is "in motion every moment" (p. 255) and we might infer that, like Valentine, he plays with his eyes closed: they are "big glowing eyes, when they're open" (p. 254). And the rapport with his sidemen is evident: "he loves the way they play, too--all those next to him" (p. 257). Those next to him are Valentine, whom "he

has to keep encouraging" (p. 257) and at whom he "looks out kindly from behind the piano" (p. 258) and Little Brother--Powerhouse "loves to listen to everything he does" (p. 258).

The story is musically authentic on a technical level--but much more remarkable is Miss Welty's feeling for the jazz experience, the joy, sorrow, and renewal implicit in the work of a jazz artist. James Baldwin, a writer close to the jazz world, has remarked, "I have always wondered why there has never, or almost never, appeared in fiction any of the joy of Louis Armstrong or the really bottomless, ironic, and mocking sadness of Billie Holiday."[6]

Baldwin's own story "Sonny's Blues"[7] does contain the joy and sadness inherent in a jazz performance, and the resemblance to "Powerhouse" is considerable. Sonny, a jazz pianist who suffers from all the problems of the Harlem Negro, including drugs, goes to a jam session. His brother, the narrator, describes the experience:

> All I know about music is that not many people really ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours.[8]

There are "vanishing evocations" in Powerhouse's communication: "And who could ever remember any of the things he says? They are just inspired remarks that roll out of his mouth like smoke" (p. 273). And it is clear by now that he too is "dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it" through his creation of Uranus Knockwood; and, insofar as he triumphs over Knockwood, his triumph is shared by those who share his "music."

Sonny is encouraged by Creole, the bass player, much in the way that Powerhouse encourages Valentine: "'Go on, go on, give it up, bring it on out there'" ("Powerhouse," p. 257). Creole "was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing--he had been there and he knew."[9] Powerhouse, like other characters in Miss Welty's fiction, gains knowledge through the descent into the depths: "he himself seems lost--down in the song, yelling up like somebody in a whirlpool. . . . But he knows, really" (p. 257). For Sonny to strike out past the shoreline, he must fully possess his instrument: "he has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to."[10] When Powerhouse returns to the dance hall, he "took hold of the piano . . . and tested it for strength, hit it down in the bass, played an

octave with his elbow, lifted the top, looked inside, and leaned against it with all his might. He sat down and played it for a few minutes with outrageous force and got it under his power" (p. 273). Sonny gets control of his instrument and "he seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers a damn brand-new piano,"[11] suggesting spiritual renewal, a process Powerhouse engages in through his music and his fantasy.

While the content of "Powerhouse" captures remarkably the spirit of jazz, the method of narration in the story emphasizes it. Possibly the first thing one notices about the narration is that it creates the illusion of spontaneity, a principal ingredient in jazz. The story is told almost entirely in the present tense.[12] "Powerhouse is playing" (p. 254) it begins, and to some degree in the same way the narrator is playing, improvising, suggesting, embellishing a theme, exhorting the reader to listen to what is happening <u>now</u>. The surface action (what little there is) proceeds in an undeviatingly chronological sequence; what background information we do receive is given in the dialogue of the moment. Even Powerhouse's tale, obviously a fabrication, is given exclusively in the present tense, so that we have, in its effect, an improvisation within an improvisation. Miss Welty has ingeniously blended content and technique in this story--in a way, she does what Powerhouse does.[13] But the similarities between Powerhouse and Miss Welty as artists

go beyond technique and they go beyond this story, for the problems and methods of Powerhouse as an artist are suggestive of the problems and methods of the artist that Miss Welty has treated in other stories and in her critical essays.

Smith Kirkpatrick observes that "sometimes the verse and prose poets turn essayists and explore the mystic area wherein experience both primordial and immediate is changed into poetry. . . . Eudora Welty chose to write of the man-artist not in an essay but in the short story 'Powerhouse,' which enables her to render the how of the transmission of experience."[14] But Miss Welty has written essays wherein she describes the artistic process, and these essays compare interestingly with "Powerhouse."

In "How I Write" she speaks of the writer's "one characteristic, lyrical impulse of his mind--the impulse to praise, to love, to call up, to prophesy."[15] Powerhouse praises (Little Brother's playing), loves "the way they all play" (p. 257), calls up (from the whirlpool), and prophesies (he is likened to a sibyl [p. 255] and conjures, "looking into the ketchup bottle" [p. 266]), all from that lyrical impulse in his mind. As for the sources of stories, Miss Welty suggests they are found in "what in the outside world" leads to the emotions expressed through art: "The surest clue is the pull on the line, the 'inspiration,' the outside signal that has startled or moved the creative mind to complicity and brought

the story to active being: the irresistible, the magnetic, the alarming (pleasurable or disturbing), the overwhelming person, place or thing."[16] Just as Fats Waller was the overwhelming person[17] whose magnetism led to "Powerhouse," so Powerhouse experiences the "pull on the line"; whether it is the telegram or the music he is playing is irrelevant--something has happened--and he builds a story from it. He is compelled to do it.

The artist's compulsion to create is set forth by Miss Welty in "Words into Fiction," as she describes the relationship between a writer and his subject: "his subject may accrue, build up and build up inside him until it's intolerable to him not to try to write it in terms he can understand; he submits it to the imagination. . . . He has taken the fatal step when he puts himself in his subject's hands."[18] Powerhouse feels a need to get his story told; he submits it to his imagination and creates a fantasy which satisfies that need. In his music too, he puts himself into his subject's hands: "he's going up the keyboard. . . in some very derogatory triplet-routine, he gets higher and higher, and then he looks over the end of the piano, as if over a cliff. But not in a show-off-way--the song makes him do it" (p. 257). And the peering over the piano as if over a cliff recalls Miss Welty's language in describing the starting point for a writer's story--"the jumping off place."[19]

Now despite all the parallels between what Powerhouse does and what Miss Welty says writers do, she is well aware that musid and literature are not entirely analogous. She relieves music of the responsibility to place (lest it be objected that Powerhouse's rootlessness detracts from his role as artist): "Music and dancing, while originating out of Place--groves!--and perhaps invoking it still to minds pure and childlike, are no longer bound to dwell there."[20] But I think Miss Welty would agree that for all creative artists the "pull on the line" does take place. Powerhouse, as musician, can feel it from the music; his sensibilities need not necessarily be informed by a sense of where he is, though in this story perhaps his tale <u>is</u> triggered by place: "white dance, week night, raining, Alligator, Mississippi, long ways from home" (p. 265).

Miss Welty describes the "pull on the line" in another way in "How I Write": " there is a sort of double thunderclap at the author's ears: the break of the living world upon what is stirring inside the mind, and the answering impulse that in a moment of high consciousness fuses impact and images and fires them off together."[21] This process seems quite similar to Coleridge's conception of the workings of the imagination: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where the process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially <u>vital</u>, even as all objects

(as objects) are essentially fixed and dead."[22] Miss Welty's metaphysics might not coincide exactly with Coleridge's, but she uses the term "imagination" often in her essays, and in a way generally in accord with the conception of the word shared by nineteenth-century Romantic writers[23]: "The mind in writing a story is in the throes of imagination, and it is not in the calculations of analysis."[24] The distinction here between imagination and analysis seems quite similar to the Romantic one between the imagination and the understanding. Miss Welty amplifies this distinction in "How I Write": "The imagination further and further informs and populates the impression [of place] according to the present mood, intensification of feeling, beat of memory, [and] accretion of idea. . . . The regional writer's vision is as surely made of the local clay as any mud pie of his childhood was, and it's still the act of the imagination that makes the feast."[25]

While Miss Welty places great emphasis on the power of the imagination, she shares also the Romantic's disdain for the imitative--the work of the understanding unaided by the imagination: "Imitation, or what is in any respect second-hand, is exactly what writing is not."[26] In "Powerhouse" the section men in the band only reproduce the music in front of them; unlike Powerhouse and Valentine, who play with their eyes closed and improvise, they are "studious, wearing glasses, every one," and

that is why they "don't count" to the "real ones" (p. 257). As craftsmen they represent one end in the spectrum of artistic creation, and Sugar-Stick Thompson, who makes the vital effort, relying (as his phallic name implies) solely on instinct, represents the other. He lacks the craft ("'Can't even swim. Done it by holding his breath'"[p. 269]), and he is inarticulate. Powerhouse, the complete artist, has absolute control over his instrument, combines technical proficiency with imagination, and creates, as jazz players always try to do, solos which are never the same, each organically unique. "No two stories ever go the same way,"[27] says Miss Welty. "Variety is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities, because the power and stirring of the mind never rests."[28] "The human mind is a mass of association--and association more poetic than actual."[29] The mind, through association, creates a work of art not by following rules: "It is not rules as long as there is imagination; not aesthetics as long as there is passion [and] intensity behind the effort that calls forth and communicates, that will try and try again."[30]

In his repeated efforts Powerhouse achieves communication more from passion than from aesthetics--the first note "marks the end of any known discipline" (p. 257)--but that communication is limited to those who respond, and respond creatively to the stimulus he provides.

For Miss Welty the response to art as well as the production of art requires a kind of creative act. The novel (and presumably all art) is "made by the imagination for the imagination; it is an illusion come full circle."[31] "Both reading and writing are experiences--lifelong--in the course of which we who encounter words are persuaded by them to be brought mind and heart within the presence, the power, of the imagination."[32] The need for imaginative response seems tied in, for Miss Welty, with the idea that the finest writers are "in a sense obstructionists. As if they hold back their own best interests. . . . For if we look to the source of the deepest pleasure we receive from a writer, how surprising it seems that this very source is the quondam obstruction."[33] Powerhouse too, is in a sense, an obstructionist. He completely mystifies the members of the white community: "Powerhouse has as much as possible done by signals" (p. 256). They are too inhibited to respond to his music; the narrator here expresses the attitude of the community: "when somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him" (p. 259). But Valentine and Little Brother <u>do</u> respond to Powerhouse, and imaginatively, both in their music and in the story told at the World Café, making the story partly <u>their</u> story; and intense pleasure is their reward:

> "Why he picks her up and carries her off," [Powerhouse] says.

"Ya! Ha!"
"Carries her back around the corner. . . ."
"Oh, Powerhouse!"
"You know him."
"Uranus Knockwood."
"Yeahhh!"
"He take our wives when we gone!"
"He come in when we goes out!"
"Uh-huh!"
"He go out when we comes in!"
"Yeahhh!"
"He standing behind the door!"
"Old Uranus Knockwood."
"You know him."
"Middle-size man."
"Wears a hat."
"That's him."
Everybody in the room moans with pleasure, (pp. 268-269).

Like Powerhouse, Miss Welty demands active engagement. According to Hicks, "[her] short stories are not for inattentive readers: the best of them yield their meaning only to an effort of the imagination. But the effort is worth making."[34]

Miss Welty's interest in the imaginative faculty is not the sole link between her writing and Romantic ideas, for her themes are the themes of Romantic literature, embodying the relationships between the inner and the outer worlds. Morse Peckham describes the problems Romantics found inherent in these relationships:

"No matter how cunningly fitted together mind and nature might be, they were nevertheless utterly different in character. . . . The mind could not know nature. . . . Meaning was not immanent in nature, was not something the mind found in the world; it was something the mind imposed on the world."[35] "The Romantic

experienced a sense of profound isolation within the world and a terrifying alienation from society. These two experiences, metaphysical isolation and social alienation, . . . were the distinguishing signs of the Romantic, and they are to this day."[36] There is, for the artist, Peckham continues, a mode of perception which can sense "an order and meaning in the natural universe, even though the understanding can't reach it. . . . And it was felt to be the peculiar task and privilege of the poet, the artist, to communicate that experience in the work of art." Art in itself is redemptive, "for in the act of creating the work of art, the artist both repeats and embodies, and also makes possible for himself and others the act of seeing through and past, of dissolving, all purely human or role-playing perceptions which mask the world, as the rational part of the mind does."[37]

Powerhouse doesn't know the "truth"--that is, he doesn't "understand" it. "'No babe, it ain't the truth. . . . Truth is something worse, I ain't said what, yet. It's something hasn't come to me, but I ain't saying it won't. And when it does, then want me to tell you?' . . . "Don't, boss, don't, Powerhouse,'" replies one of the musicians, terrified at the prospect (p. 270). Little Brother (we suspect it was he) and Powerhouse know that the only truth we can ever know lies in illusion; it is through illusion that redemption is possible. The artist redeems himself

and those who can share his insight through imaginatively imposing order and meaning upon the world. Illusion is the only salvation against what Uranus Knockwood represents--the terror of meaninglessness.[38]

Powerhouse as artist can be compared with Owen Warland, "The Artist of the Beautiful,"[39] in Hawthorne's most positive statement on the artist in Romantic terms. The differences between Powerhouse and Owen, both as artists and as characters, probably outnumber the similarities; but the similarities are striking and run deep. Owen, in pursuing his art, transcends the strictures of time and works at night, as though to avoid the "reality" of daylight, which "seemed to have an intrusiveness that interfered with his pursuits" (H., p. 1146). He is compelled by his subject (the butterfly--a universal symbol of rebirth) to get his art out into the world; during a period of discouragement "perhaps the torpid slumber was broken by a convulsive pain [suggesting birth]. Perhaps, as in a former instance, the butterfly came and hovered about his head and reinspired him" (H., p. 1151). When he does present his creation to the other characters in the story, they are mystified by it, although it does achieve, in its mystery, a great deal of excitement;[40] Danforth, the blacksmith, exclaims, "'Well, that does beat all nature'" (H., p. 1154). Owen's art transcends nature and he is renewed by it. Having induced personal

redemption, the created work itself has no further value to the artist. The butterfly, Owen's creation, seems inclined in its flight to return to the artist's hand. "'Not so! not so!' murmured Owen Warland. . . . 'Thou has gone forth out of thy master's heart. There is no return for thee'" (H., p. 1156).

For Miss Welty when a story is finished "it is detached on the dot from the hand that wrote it, and the luster goes with it; what is attached is the new story."[41] Artistic renewal is constantly repeated--and Powerhouse, who has "beat all nature," goes right on, creating "twelve or fourteen choruses, piling them up nobody knows how, and it will be a wonder if he ever gets through" (p. 273).

It will be a wonder, for Powerhouse is constantly in motion, transforming and transcending the world around him. William Jones, writing neither of Powerhouse nor of Owen Warland, but about Miss Welty's fictional world in general, observes that for her "men may be capable of cruel deeds, but there are heroes among us, men who can dive down into the depths of life. . . . There are yet those men who, in spite of cruelty around them, have seen butterflies in flight, listened to the echo of the world, or felt the fall of the impregnating rain."[42] Against the cruelty of nature, Powerhouse, the artist as jazz musician, scrupulous observer, and visionary dreamer, protests; through his variations on the themes of love and separateness he endures; he endures and offers hope and even pleasure to those who will see with him the saving illusion.

Notes

Chapter One

[1] "New Writer," Time, XXXVIII (November 24, 1941), 110.

[2] "New Novels and Short Stories of America," November 16, 1941, p. 10.

[3] Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 22, 1941), 10.

[4] "New Writer," p. 110.

[5] Granville Hicks, "Eudora Welty," College English, XIV (November, 1952), 70.

[6] Hicks, p. 75.

[7] Baton Rouge, 1965, p. 75.

[8] Eudora Welty(New York, 1962), p. 77.

[9] Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," Three Papers on Fiction (Northampton, Massachusetts, 1962), p. 11.

[10] "Love and Separateness in Miss Welty," Kenyon Review, VI (Spring, 1944), 246.

[11] Chicago, 1963, pp. 258-259.

[12] Warren, p. 249.

[13] Warren, pages 250-251.

[14] Warren, page 259.

[15] A Southern Vanguard, ed. Allen Tate (New York, 1947), p. 78.

[16] Appel, p. 3. Appel's debt to Warren is acknowledged on p. ix. One of the dangers involved in issuing blanket statements about Miss Welty's fiction lies in the great variety with which she handles her themes. Powerhouse seems hardly innocent or defenseless.

[17] Appel, p. 3.

[18] Vande Kieft, p. 81.

[19] Selected Stories of Eudora Welty (New York, 1954), p. 3 of A Wide Net. This volume contains all the stories of Miss Welty's first two collections. All future page references to the stories placed in parentheses in the text will refer to this edition.

[20] Warren, p. 247.

[21] Glenn, p. 89.

[22] The Wide Net stories were published in various magazines between November, 1941, and April, 1943. ("Powerhouse" was published in June, 1941). See Vande Kieft, pp. 195-196, for the

magazines and dates of publication.

23 Warren, p. 246.

24 Vande Kieft, p. 82.

25 Appel, p. 149.

26 Selected Criticism (New York, 1955), p. 208, cited in Benjamin Griffith, "'Powerhouse' as a Showcase of Eudora Welty's Methods and Themes," Mississippi Quarterly, XIX (Spring, 1966), 79.

27 Glenn, p. 82.

28 "Three Methods of Modern Fiction," College English, XII (January, 1951), 202.

29 Vande Kieft, pp. 81-84.

30 Appel, pp. 148-164.

31 "The Anointed Powerhouse," Sewanee Review, LXXVII (Winter, 1969), 94-108.

32 Griffith, p. 79.

33 Hicks, p. 72.

34 "How I Write," in Understanding Fiction, ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1959), p. 546.

35 "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," in What is the Short Story?, ed. Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick (Glenview, Illinois, 1961), p. 109.

36 "How I Write," p. 549.

37 Vande Kieft, p. 26.

38 "Introduction," Selected Stories, p. xxii.

39 The term is used by Vande Kieft, p. 27. Appel refers to the girl as an "artist-personality" (p. 5). Both terms are justified by the content of the story.

40 Appel notes that "Flowers for Marjorie" "is one of the few stories in which Miss Welty has ventured out of Mississippi, a significant fact when we consider that its central weakness can be traced to its 'sense of place'--or lack of it" (p. 230). For Miss Welty's own views on the importance of "place" in fiction, see "Place in Fiction," pp. 1-15.

41 P. 231-232. Miss Vande Kieft makes the observation that there is "something queer" about the whole narrative and cites Mark Schorer's suggestion that the story itself might be "hallucinatory, taking place in Bowman's mind as he lies on his hospital bed" (Eudora Welty, p. 81). Schorer's interpretation is

in The Story (Englewood Cliffs, 1951), pp. 354-355.

42 The fantasies and dreams of Miss Welty's characters should not be interpreted simply as devices by which they escape the outer world. Her point is that there is a great deal of reality in one's dreams, that there is often something sacred and sustaining in them.

43 "Eudora Welty: The Sense of Place," South: Modern Southern Literature in its Cultural Setting, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs, (Garden City, 1961), p. 278, cited in Griffith, p. 81. Griffith observes the fitting use of the word "counterpoint" applied to "Powerhouse," a story about musicians.

44 In "A Piece of News" the rain "outside the cabin accentuates and increases Ruby's sense of isolation" (Appel, p. 15). In "Powerhouse" when the musicians go to the World Cafe, "the wall and the rain . . . and the . . . Negroes watching enclose them" (p. 266).

45 "A majority of blues lyrics involve some kind of movement from one place to another, and not surprisingly, for American Negro life has been characterized by an aimless horizontal mobility resulting from frustrated hopes for a vertical mobility" (Appel, p. 153).

46 "Walking" in jazz parlance is nearly synonymous with playing.

A jazz player "walks" when he is "swinging," and, significantly enough, when he plays with great feeling, he "wails."

47 Griffith notes the connotations of these names and cites "Candy Man Blues," a song familiar to Mississippi Negroes, which "is filled with wordplay that makes a phallic symbol of a stick of candy, as in the verse: 'His stick candy don't melt away, Just gets better so the ladies say'" (p. 83).

48 Printed incorrectly in Selected Stories as "Empty Red Blues."

49 Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," Antioch Review, V (Summer, 1945), 199, cited in Appel, p. 149.

50 Warren, p. 256.

51 This device is most evident in "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," where a letter, a telegram, telephone wires, a train, and a bridge are all part of a story in which there is no communication, only delightful confusion.

Chapter Two

1 "Place in Fiction," p. 11.

2 "Place in Fiction," p. 15.

3 Hicks, p. 76.

[4] "Introduction," Selected Stories, p. xiv.

[5] In Fiction of the Forties Eisinger writes that "Miss Welty's utilization of myth . . . arises from a conviction that mythic patterns are deeply ingrained in the human consciousness and possess therefore a perennial relevance" (p. 261).

[6] Warren, p. 255.

[7] "Eudora Welty's use of Mythology," Shenandoah, VI (Spring, 1955), 34.

[8] Morris, p. 37.

[9] Morris, p. 38.

[10] "Name and Symbol in the Prose of Eudora Welty," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXII (December, 1958), 173-174.

[11] Jones, pp. 174-175. Also, in a note on p. 174: "Uranus appears in a story about a titanic Negro pianist, 'Powerhouse'; the shadow of Hercules, the famous archer of antiquity, hovers over R. J. Bowman in "Death of a Traveling Salesman."

[12] Eisinger, pp. 263-264. These observations are quite applicable to "Powerhouse" and they can serve to refute Jones's theory that all of Miss Welty's use of myth in the early stories

was simple and direct, that she practiced a "one to one equating . . . in A Curtain of Green" (Jones, p. 175).

13 Hicks, p. 75. He uses the terms "fable" and "legend" loosely. In modern criticism fable is synonymous with structure or plot. Evidently, Hicks means that some of the stories have a fabulous quality. M. M. Liberman and Edward E. Foster point out that legend is distinguished from myth "by a lesser intrusion of the supernatural and a greater pretense of historicity" (A Modern Lexicon of Literary Terms [Glenview, Illinois, 1968], pp. 63-64). Although Miss Welty's stories of the Natchez Trace in A Wide Net approach a legendary quality, it would be better to say that where she achieves universality it is the universality of myth.

14 Hicks, p. 75.

15 New York, 1968, p. 521.

16 In the beginning and closing sections of the story the narrator seems to be "characterized" as a member of the white audience with attitudes typical of that audience: "You know people on a stage--and people of a darker race--so likely to be marvelous, frightening" (p. 255). "And who could ever remember any of the things he says. They are just inspired remarks that roll out of his mouth like smoke" (p. 273). In the middle section, however, the narration is quite objective, free from editorial comment, completely outside

the minds of the characters. But then when Scoot asks Powerhouse if he isn't going to call Gypsy on the telephone to see if she is home, we read: "That is one crazy drummer that's going to get his neck broken some day" (p. 272). Here the narrative appears to be expressing the thought of the other musicians.

[17] Appel, 149. The excesses could refer both to his size and to the tall tale he tells. He is given to exaggeration: "'Here's a million nickels,'" he says in the World Cafe. "'Where you going to find enough beer to put out on this here table?'" (p. 264).

[18] Appel, p. 148. In an interview given to jazz critic Whitney Balliett, Mary Lou Williams, a jazz pianist, tells of an experience at a jam session: "I went down and Coleman Hawkins was there--Fletcher Henderson was in town--and he was having a bad time. He was down to his undershirt, and sweating and battling for his life against Lester Young and Herschel Evans and Ben [Webster] too." Whitney Balliett, Such Sweet Thunder (New York, 1966), p. 148.

[19] Jones, p. 182. He notes several descents in later works: "Loch Morrison, the retriever of the metronome in 'June Recital,' dives into the depths of Moon Lake in the story 'Moon Lake' in order to save one of the girls, Easter; Laura, one of the leading characters in Delta Wedding, falls into the Yazoo River; William

Wallace in 'The Wide Net' dives far below the surface of the Pearl River; and Virgie Rainey, the Virgin figure, who is to feel the fertilizing power of the rain at the end of The Golden Apples, had also swum beneath the surface of the river."

[20] Jones, p. 183.

[21] Griffith, p. 84. There is no indication in the story that Powerhouse talks to the waitress in symbols, and I don't follow the peacock feather business.

[22] Jones, p. 175.

[23] Jones, p. 174.

[24] Mythology (New York, 1940), pp. 64-65.

[25] Hamilton, p. 65

[26] Hamilton, pp. 65-66.

[27] Griffith suggests that Powerhouse "concocts the unlikely name of 'Uranus Knockwood' as the signee of the telegram perhaps as a punning insult--your anus, Knockwood (i. e. drummer)--to the inquisitive Scoot, the only one who fails to understand the private joke" (p. 81). But there is no direct evidence in the story that there is a private joke, or that anyone understood there to be one.

[28] Hamilton, p. 65

[29] Hamilton, p. 104.

Chapter Three

[1] "Place in Fiction," p. 12.

[2] Vande Kieft, p. 16.

[3] "Introduction," Selected Stories, p. xiv.

[4] P. 259. Powerhouse does this as he states the four monosyllables of the telegram ("'your wife is dead'"), indicating perhaps a moment of merging between music and fantasy. Griffith surmises that he interpolates the time signature satirically, "perhaps out of boredom with the undemanding waltz" (p. 81). But there is really nothing less demanding about 3/4 time than there is about 4/4 time. A better conjecture is that Powerhouse is denying the strictures of time. He doesn't know what time it is (p. 261), and the first note the band plays "marks the end of any known discipline" (p. 257). Less likely is the possibility that there is an allusion here to Scoot, the sceptical drummer, a superfluous member of the quartet who doesn't communicate responsively like the other three. Powerhouse has to cry "'where that skin beater'" (p. 257) when more

drums are needed, and "he plays the piano like a drumssometimes" (p. 261).

5 Such Sweet Thunder (New York, 1966), pp. 137-138.

6 Appel, p. 149. He does not cite the source.

7 Going to Meet the Man (New York, 1965), pp. 101-142. Another good story about Negro jazz musicians is J. F. Powers' "He Don't Plant Cotton" in Prince of Darkness (New York, 1958), pp. 77-78. "This story . . . contains a treatment of Negro music that is to be compared with Eudora Welty's "Powerhouse." The music made by Powers' Negroes is the food for their will and the lines that mark out their being; it is the world that the gross, flesh-bound whites cannot enter, the world where matter flows into immaterial but sustaining sound" (Eisinger, p. 177).

8 Baldwin, p. 137.

9 Baldwin, p. 138.

10 Baldwin, p. 128.

11 Baldwin, p. 138.

12 Only one shift in tense occurs, and that towards the end of the story: "When Powerhouse first came back from intermission, no

doubt full of beer, they said, he got the band tuned up in his own way" (p. 273). The paragraph continues in the past tense. The effect here is as if the narrator, who has hovered over the action until now, has been preceded into the dance hall by the musicians and has to rely on hearsay evidence for a short time. Miss Welty's aim here is puzzling. Two conjectures: 1) the "they said" is an easy way to comment directly on the attitude of the white community; 2) the shift might indicate that the climax of the story has been reached, that Powerhouse is beginning anew, for the story returns to the present tense: "Now and then he shouts 'Somebody loves me!'" (p. 273).

[13] Ray B. West, Jr. notes that in this story "Miss Welty . . . has . . . completely adopted the technique of the jazz musician" although he doesn't say how she does it except for an unsupported assertion: "the fact is that this story which deals with musicians is constructed much in the same manner as a musical composition." "Three Methods of Modern Fiction," College English, XII (January, 1951), 199.

[14] Kirkpatrick, p. 94.

[15] "How I Write," p. 546.

[16] "How I Write," p. 546.

[17] Vande Kieft, p. 23.

18 "Words into Fiction," Three Papers on Fiction, pp. 21-22.

19 "How I Write," p. 548.

20 "Place in Fiction," p. 3.

21 "How I Write," p. 553.

22 Biographia Literaria (London, 1960), p. 167. He is writing here of the secondary imagination. The primary imagination is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception."

23 Richard Harter Fogle summarizes this conception: "The imagination, perceiving in reality the basic life--principle and unity, reproduces them in art, endowing the individual work with such life and unity as is possible and appropriate to it. . . . The imaginative work of art will be as it were a living organism, with a development and individuality appropriate to the laws inherent in itself." ("The World and the Artist: A Study of Hawthorne's 'Artist of the Beautiful,'" Tulane Studies in English, I [1949], 39.) When Miss Welty argues that analysis might destroy a story's uniqueness, she seems to see the uniqueness in organic terms: "The first thing we notice about a story is that . . . it seems bathed in something of its own." ("The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," p. 110.)

24 "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," p. 110.

25 "How I Write," p. 547.

26 "Words into Fiction," p. 16.

27 "Place in Fiction," p. 5.

28 "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," p. 115.

29 "Place in Fiction," p. 5.

30 "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," p. 115.

31 "Words into Fiction," p. 25.

32 "Words into Fiction," p. 16.

33 "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," p. 114.

34 Hicks, p. 73.

35 Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1965), p. 18.

36 Peckham, p. 19.

37 Peckham, p. 20.

38 For Peckham, Nietzsche solved the Romantic's problem of finding a ground for value by denying that value exists: "Eternal recurrence was the answer, continuous renewal of identity. . . .

The world is nothing. Value and identity are the ultimate illusions. We emerge from nothingness and encounter the nothingness of the world. But being can be renewed only if it is recognized that it is an illusion" (p. 32).

39 The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1937), pp. 1139-1156. Parenthetical references in this paragraph will be to this edition.

40 "The last scene of the story shows an audience of naturalists come to a symbolist play." Rudolph Von Abele, "Baby and Butterfly," Kenyon Review, XXIII (Spring, 1953), 285. We are reminded of the audience which surrounds Powerhouse and of Diana Trilling's comment on Miss Welty's fiction: it "has tremendous emotional impact despite its obscurity." Quoted by Warren, p. 258. He does not give the source.

41 "How I Write," p. 545.

42 Jones, p. 185.

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